

Conclusion: A Truth Commission for Northern Ireland?

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It is a commonly held belief that certain societies are prisoners of the past in such an intractable way that they bind themselves in inescapable chains. The people of Northern Ireland are often mistakenly referred to in this way. The Troubles, and the decades, and some would argue centuries prior, have created a set of beliefs and myths that have protracted the conflict - these are both real and imagined. However, the role the past plays in the present in Northern Ireland is not unique. Brian Walker writes:

History is no more and no less important in Ireland than elsewhere. The current situation is not linked in a distinctive way to the past. The conflict in Northern Ireland is not an age-old one...Other parts of Europe have also faced and still do face similar problems. As elsewhere, leaders and people in Ireland, both north and south, have a vital role to play in determining the shape of their own society, and are not just helpless victims of a turbulent past.¹

Similarly, the situation in Northern Ireland, as it is popularly held, is not one that has been static and unchanging. John Darby notes:

History has bequeathed a varied inheritance. The common view that the Irish conflict is intractable because it is unchanging is demonstrably untrue. Since the Norman invasion by Henry II of England in the twelfth century, it is possible to discern significant shifts in the Irish problem.²

In addition, when asking whether Northern Ireland should deal with its past, as this book attempts to do, it implies that little is being done currently to come to terms with the legacy of conflict. Northern Ireland is in the midst of a dynamic process of attempting to deal with its past. It is in a process of change. History is not retractable and the past is not being left untouched. This, broadly speaking, ranges from the initiatives amongst politicians (including their wranglings and disagreements) to grass-roots projects undertaken by community groups.

There are a number of groups and individuals that are recording the stories of victims in a variety of ways, some of these being archived and others made public. Commemoration and remembrance has also been a constant feature of the society. It has also, however, been sectarian at times. The countryside and cities are littered with community memorials. Remembrance is commonplace. The truth about incidents that have taken place has also constantly been revealed and made public through the work of many writers and community groups. Northern Ireland is, and has been, working through the past and engaging in a process of selective remembering and forgetting for some time.

The question is, however, to what degree would an official process of national truth recovery and acknowledgement be beneficial? In addition, could the process of remembering become one that builds rather than divides the society?

Arguably an official truth recovery process could enhance existing grass-roots processes of remembering, and also serve to acknowledge hurts, appropriately apportion responsibility and create a new broadly consensual truth and history. Equally, given the history of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, and that peace is not yet firmly entrenched, an official truth recovery process could also increase political tensions and lead to unnecessary, and unrepentant, finger-pointing.

On most accounts, an official truth recovery process seems unlikely at this point. The balance of power between forces during transition generally determines government policy on issues.³ In Northern Ireland, at this stage, the forces are too evenly weighted and all sides are content to leave *their* truths hidden for now. Most political players

demand truth from those they perceive as the other side or sides, but seem unwilling to offer the truth from their side, or acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions. This is mostly due to fear that such acknowledgement (public or otherwise) will weaken their position as parties vie for power in the new dispensation and that the truth may be used against them within the context of the delicate peace that prevails. There are also those in Northern Ireland who refuse to accept that they did anything wrong or that their action (or inaction) was complicit in perpetuating the conflict.

Bill Rolston remains doubtful about a truth recovery process ever happening in Northern Ireland because one of the main role players in a comprehensive truth recovery process would have to be the British government. It seems unlikely that they would ever expose the intricacies of their activities in Northern Ireland on an equal footing with other role players. He writes, presumably sardonically, that:

It could be argued that these debates are irrelevant in the Irish context. Demands for truth and for truth commissions may be relevant to previous military dictatorships in Latin America or Africa or previous totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, but not to the North of Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom, which is said to be a democratic society.⁴

In addition, the timing of the process of revealing truth is critical and the peace remains too fragile. As the Northern Ireland Assembly begins its work there does not seem to be overwhelming political support (or rationale) for an all encompassing truth recovery process in Northern Ireland as typified by what has taken place in South Africa. The time is not right to begin the difficult quest of uncovering the past. However, once the situation has stabilised, then a truth recovery process or truth commission could be, and arguably should be, seriously considered.

Several commentators in Northern Ireland, and certainly those working with victims, do express that it is important that the idea of having a truth recovery process should not be ruled out of hand. It is undoubtedly useful, and necessary, for victims to tell their stories and feel acknowledged. In addition, the full facts (and truths) about many incidents are not known in Northern Ireland. These include well known controversies such as the Stalker affair, and allegations that members of the security forces have colluded with loyalist paramilitary organisations,⁵ as well as the full facts about a host of paramilitary murders. There are still questions about the whereabouts and the exact circumstances of death of the approximately 20 'disappeared' persons in Northern Ireland.⁶ There are also calls for truth and justice with regard to the 359 families who have been bereaved by disputed killings by security forces for which there have been only four convictions.⁷ Rolston concludes that despite the reservations about a full-blown truth commission the debates and demands for truth will not disappear in the short-term. He writes:

No matter what the future holds, no matter how far the situation slips back into violence, while there are those who believe that a just peace is possible, the issue of the right to truth must be included in discussions about the nature of that peace.⁸

For Rolston the concept of a truth commission should not be rejected.⁹ Similarly, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield in his report, *We Will Remember Them*, does not rule out the possibility of a truth commission type process in Northern Ireland. He does, however, note with some caution that:

Unhappily, 'truth' can be used as a weapon as well as a shield. If such a device were to have a place in Northern Ireland, it could only be in the context of a wide-ranging political accord.¹⁰

Wide ranging support of the kind Bloomfield mentions does not seem to exist at this point as has been mentioned. But are the resistances to truth recovery in Northern Ireland wider than the mere political?

Grahame Hayes,¹¹ reflecting on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, says that it is not surprising that there is a resistance to the truth about the past being revealed. He writes:

The resistance comes from many quarters: the perpetrators fear the truth because of the guilt of their actions; the benefactors fear the truth because of the 'silence' of their complicity; some victims fear the truth because of the apprehension of forgetting through the process of forgiveness; and other victims fear the truth because it is too painful to bear.

He concludes that reconciliation takes place at the point where we struggle with understanding our own personal resistances to uncovering the past. This implies that we should not be asking the question *should we remember?* But rather we should begin the debate by asking why is it that we feel we *should not remember*. This point was made by several of the authors in this book, as well as the point that for many victims, given the trauma they have suffered, it is impossible to forget anyway. In light of this, Hayes would urge us to investigate our own personal motives and resistances to a truth recovery process, not in a judgmental way, but as a way of understanding our own relationship to the past. This may be one starting point for the people of Northern Ireland.

The other starting point is to open the debate about truth recovery in Northern Ireland in a realistic and cautious, but forward-looking manner. We need to appreciate the limitations of truth commissions but also understand that the demand (and internationally accepted right) for truth will not disappear. Demands for truth and justice reverberate in Northern Ireland today and have done so for many years - these will continue irrespective of the successes (and failures) at the political level.

Naturally, we should not fall into the trap of simplistically arguing that revealing (telling the truth) is instantaneously healing as it is commonly held. Hayes writes, '*just revealing, is not just healing. It depends on how we reveal, the context of the revealing, and what it is that we are revealing*'.¹² Speaking out needs to be done in a structured manner and for specific ends. Unstructured truth telling and truth for truth's sake is pointless. In the same vein, effective trauma counselling and support for victims should not be equated with dealing with the past. Support services such as those recommended in the Bloomfield Report are necessary – but for many victims it is unlikely that they will divorce the questions of truth, justice, the labelling of responsibility for the violations, compensation and official acknowledgement from their suffering. Counselling can deal with the consequences of the past effectively but, in itself, is not the only strategy or primary component of dealing with the past after extensive levels of violence. Support for victims is only one component of an effective strategy for dealing with the past.

Ignatieff argues that truth commissions can provide a useful frame in which the public discourse and memory can be housed.¹³ They can create new public spaces in which the debate and discussion on the past can continually occur. To this end, he writes:

A truth commission cannot overcome a society's divisions. It can only winnow out the solid core of facts upon which society's arguments with itself should be conducted. But it cannot bring these arguments to a conclusion.¹⁴

History in conflict-ridden societies is a debate and a volatile one at that. However, its volatility forces us not to ignore the irresolvable debates of history but rather to seek out ways to deal with them. It seems logical that these may be best dealt with through institutionalised and legitimate social and community frameworks. Framing the debate in the form of an institution like a commission can potentially help defuse the explosive content of history. Equally, some may argue that truth commissions water down the uncovering of the truth as they generally dilute and strain out too much of the past in order to satisfy all the political players. The number of whitewash commissions there have been around the world is evidence of this.

At this point in Northern Ireland, it seems the best that can be hoped for is that a 'patchwork of truth' will start to be uncovered, i.e. through individual communities documenting their stories and making them public.¹⁵ The REMHI project in Guatemala teaches us that grass-roots truth recovery projects, and listening to the stories of victims, can provide a powerful alternative to official truth commissions. Adhoc commissions of inquiry could also reveal some truths - the ongoing 'Bloody Sunday Inquiry' may set a precedent in this regard. Undoubtedly, if the society normalises, the truth will also start to emerge through the media and through books.

At the same time, even if community groups embark on truth recovery processes at the local level, and there are a host of inquiries and other investigations that begin to build a patchwork quilt of truth in Northern Ireland, it can be anticipated that the call for

official acknowledgement will not cease in the short-term. The people of Northern Ireland have competing versions of the past, but it is unlikely that the society will be able to move on, regardless of successes at the political level, without some versions of the past being officially legitimised and validated, and some even discarded. Many people in Northern Ireland have died in the name of a cause legitimised by their side of the conflict. Others, perhaps the majority, have covertly supported violence merely by their silence or disrespect for the dead of the other community. If a negotiated dispensation that includes all role-players is consolidated, the society cannot escape the debate about the competing moralities of the use of violence. Equally the plight and demands of the victims and survivors, state and otherwise, will not simply be swept under the carpet through providing adequate counselling, support and compensation. To this end, the debate about the truth in Northern Ireland, and how to reveal it, or suppress it, is merely beginning.

Notes

1 Brian Walker, *Dancing to History's Tune: History, myth and politics in Ireland* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen's University of Belfast, 1996), p. 158.

2 John Darby, *Scorpions in a Bottle: Conflict Cultures in Northern Ireland* (London: Minority Rights Publications, 1997), p.40.

3 Jamal Benomar, 'Confronting the Past: Justice in Transitions', *Journal of Democracy*, 4(1), (1993), p. 13.

4 Bill Rolston, *Turning the Page without Closing the Book: The Right to Truth in the Irish Context* (Dublin: Irish Reporter Publications, 1996), p.31.

5 See 'Political Killings in Northern Ireland', Amnesty International, February 1994.

6 There are more than 20 bodies unaccounted for in Northern Ireland most said to be Catholics killed by the Republican groups and the IRA. The IRA have acknowledged that 12 of the people abducted and killed between 1972 and 1980 were victims of activities committed under its command, see *The Irish Times*, Friday, June 26, 1998, Front Page.

7 See, The Pat Finucane Centre for Human Rights and Social Change, 'Submission to the Independent Commission into Policing', <http://www.serve.com/pfc/submiss1.html>.

8 Bill Rolston, *Turning the Page without Closing the Book: The Right to Truth in the Irish Context* (Dublin: Irish Reporter Publications, 1996), p.49.

9 Bill Rolston, 'Turning the page without closing the book', in *Wounded Nations, Broken Lives: Truth Commissions and War Tribunals*, *Index*, No. 5. (1996).

10 Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, *We Will Remember Them: Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner* (Belfast: HMSO. The Stationery Office, April 1998), p.38.

11 Grahame Hayes, 'We Suffer Our Memories: Thinking about the past, healing and reconciliation', *American Imago*, Volume 55, Number 1, Spring (1998), p.46.

12 Grahame Hayes, 'We Suffer Our Memories', p.43.

13 See Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

14 Michael Ignatieff, in *Wounded Nations, Broken Lives: Truth Commissions and War Tribunals*, *Index*, No. 5., (1996), p.113.

15 Bill Rolston made the point of a 'patchwork of truth' to the author in an interview in Belfast on the 5th of November 1998.